The Miller, the Maltster, and the Merchant.

Robin Appel

We write a lot about mills, but rather less about the millers who operated them. The likes of Joseph Rank and Joel Spiller became household names, but for most of the rest, the vital role they played in the community in their day has long been disregarded along with too many of their former premises. Yet they were such an important part of our history, not only providing one of the vital staples of life, but also a range of job opportunities, often across a wider spectrum of rural industry, and occasionally delivering acts of philanthropy that benefited everyone.

The thread of this story is that it was not unusual for the *miller* to also combine the activity of *maltster*, provider of another of life's staples, and, sometimes, the activities of both *corn and coal merchant.*

Miller/Maltster

Perhaps the most compelling and surviving example of a miller/maltster (as I revealed 4 years ago in newsletter 123, Winter 2018) is the one right under our very noses in Hampshire, sat astride the Eling Causeway. Here, the mill is described as having two Poncelet water wheels, each driving a pair of stones, one pair for grinding wheat into flour, the other pair, according to the official guide (*Eling Tide Mill, the history of a working mill*, Diana Smith), for crushing 'barley for malt making', but, let us get it the right way round, actually for crushing malt ready for brewing. The malt came from what now transpires to be the adjoining malthouse (previously described as an adjoining grain store) which now houses the sailing club. The buildings are described in 1933 as 'communicating', so it would be difficult to believe the two activities of milling and malting were ever separate businesses.

The Mill at Burnham Overy, Norfolk, behind which sits the Malthouse

In the centre of Lyme Regis, in Dorset, the Town Mill sits right next to the maltings, and at Burnham Overy in Norfolk, the mill sits astride the River Burn, while the maltings is immediately adjacent on the eastern bank of the mill race. These two examples could have each involved a separate proprietor, but both milling and malting were prosperous 'first process' activities derived directly from the annual corn harvest.

The old adage 'Five grades in, one grade out' which implied enrichment from exploitation, was, back in the day, metaphorically pinned to the door of every mill and every malthouse! So, with sufficient capital, it would be easy, and compelling, to combine both trades, and the record of former maltsters (*British Malting Industry since 1830*, Christine Clark) lists a number of businesses which continued milling long after they stopped making malt such as E G Clarke & Son Ltd, Framlingham, Suffolk; or Brooks (Mistley) Ltd, Essex.

The combined trades should not surprise us, as when attending the local corn markets to review the harvest, as Newson Garrett (1812-1893) of Snape Maltings, in Suffolk, made a point of doing (*Port on the Alde,* Julia Philips), it would be difficult not to talk to farmers about the yield and quality of their wheat crop at the same time as inspecting their barley. Besides, in those days, farmers were particularly loyal to the miller, maltster, or merchant they preferred to sell their corn to. It was certainly not acceptable practice to hawk your grain samples around different buyers. In fact, quite the opposite, if you had no buyer lined up, you presented your grain at the local Corn Exchange, and had to wait for a buyer to find you! So it was particularly convenient for farmers if a single customer for their corn performed a range of activities which secured them a market for all the corn they had to sell.

More than Milling and Malting

But that range of activities very easily stretched beyond just milling and malting. It sometimes included the role of corn merchant. Back to Eling Tide Mill, in 1785, the then proprietor, John Chandler, was described as 'a prosperous and enterprising corn merchant'!

If farmers were to continue growing the preferred varieties of wheat and barley their customers requested, every so often they needed to purchase 'new' seed corn. Back along, this would be derived from the 'finest quality' grain, originally purchased for processing into flour or malt, but then put to one side, re-cleaned over a dresser, and delivered back out to farms for sowing. As recently as the 1960s this was still a substantial source of seed sold to farmers under two fanciful headings 'Field Inspected' and 'Field Approved'. From my own experience 'Field Inspected' involved very few steps beyond the field gate prior to harvest, although 'Field Approved' was a bit more thorough, both in the field and in the seed store.

But selling seeds to farmers was probably not as profitable as milling or malting. Back in the 19th century, Edwin Tucker, a farmer in Devon, set himself up as a seed merchant, but then chose to expand into malting, eventually operating up to 5 different malthouses. His son, Parnell Tucker, went on to build one magnificent new maltings, in 1900, alongside the railway track in Newton Abbott. (Parnell didn't stop there: he eventually graduated to an even more lucrative occupation, as a brewer, in Exeter.)

But for millers and maltsters, if trading as a merchant (of seed corn) was perhaps a means to an end, it sometimes went even further still. When I was a boy, brightly liveried lorries plying their way along the country roads of East Anglia regularly carried the description 'Corn, Seed & Coal Merchant'. There was a historical reason for the inclusion of coal.

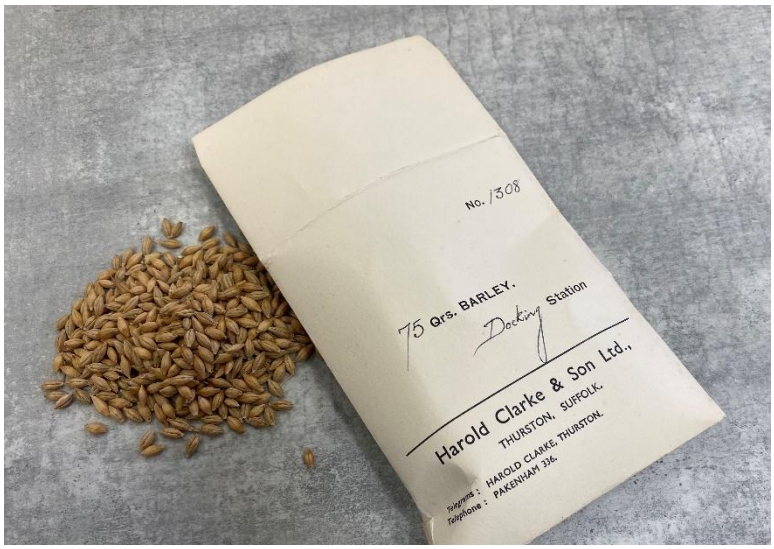
Ipswich Corn Exchange crowded with Corn Merchants, Tuesday, September 3rd, 1963.

We are talking about the days of on-farm rick yards when the harvest was bundled into sheaves, originally by hand, then courtesy of the binder. Come the winter, the stacks of barley and wheat had to be threshed, normally by a visiting contractor whose main source of power was a steam powered traction engine. This operation could stretch over a week or more and required a lot of coal. The merchant would traditionally supply the empty sacks for the grain, and the coal for the steam engine, all of which was probably deducted from the remittance for the corn. But, of course, as coal merchant to the farmers, it was very difficult not to be coal merchant to the remainder of the local community. My grandfather's substantial barley merchant's business ended up with 6 full time employees performing the role of coal merchant, including 3 delivery drivers with regular rounds across half a dozen parishes or more.

River or Railway

Where possible, many mills were constructed straddling a reliable water course, but with the coming of the railways, maltsters and merchants were better situated alongside the tracks. Quite apart from the easier access to coal supplies (maltsters for their kilns, merchants for the traction engines), the barley trade itself very quickly centred around the rail network. By the beginning of the 20th century, and long before dual carriageways, the need to deliver vast quantities of malting barley from East Anglian and Wessex farms to the huge malthouses of the national brewers in London, the West Midlands, and the north of England, struggled with the horse and cart, the canal barge ,or the early motor lorry. .

So farmers needed to deliver their barley to the nearest railway station for forwarding, either to their immediate customer, or to the next or final customer for their grain. As a result, Merchants sample bags (*right*) representing individual parcels of malting barley were printed accordingly, naming the 'Station', that is, the railway station, closest to the farm where the barley was grown.



The village of Docking in Norfolk had a railway station, which became a favourite source of malting barley in 'The Brewing Capital of the World', Burton-on-Trent. As soon as this became wider knowledge, merchants took advantage. If a particular sample of malting barley failed to find favour on Bury St Edmunds' Corn Exchange on a Wednesday afternoon, the merchant would take it home, re-package it in a sample bag naming Docking as the station, and the parcel would readily sell on Norwich Corn Exchange the following Saturday morning! As a result, Docking railway station became massively oversubscribed with consignments of malting barley, some finding their way there from as far afield as the wrong side of the Suffolk border!

A Legacy Worth Protecting

Alas, today there is only a limited trace of our former malthouses, more often than not just a street name like Malt Lane, Bishops Waltham. In Dereham, Norfolk, and Ipswich, Suffolk, two spectacular blocks of flats are forever former Malthouses, thanks to the signature architecture of the 'pyramid style' kiln roofs that the developers either chose, or were compelled, to retain. But there are few similar examples. Merchants' former granaries have long since been swept away.

In glorious contrast, our water mills, sometimes with adjoining Georgian-fronted houses, punctuating our smaller rivers, have not only survived in large numbers, but have evolved into the 'chocolate box' image of the perfect pastoral setting. That so many of them also retain parts, if not all, of their original infrastructure, is truly remarkable.

Not only that, we have the legacy of John Constable who chose to illustrate them (Flatford and Parnham Mills), George Eliot who chose to write a classic novel around *The Mill on the Floss*, and Ronald Binge's musical composition *The Water Mill* which only serves to immortalise the romantic image of 'dusty miller'!

Why! oh why! I continually ask myself, was the maltster, that key provider of the other staple, so overlooked? Any advance on Warren's Malthouse in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*?

Benjamin Britten chose Snape Maltings because, when four of its former kilns were gutted, it was uniquely big enough to convert to a concert hall, and it was close to Aldeburgh, his home. I do not believe he had any particular interest in preserving the image of malting.

Musical Malt Kilns

As for the merchants, they have almost sunk without trace beyond - Thomas Hardy again – *The Mayor of Casterbridge* whose trading folly has been re-enacted over and over throughout the last 50 years. No lasting legacy there, only ignominy!

So, I suggest, it is vitally important we retain a watching brief over our mills, in order to protect them. We do so need formalised groups who can speak up for them, and support them. As Clive Aslet wrote recently in *Country Life*, of old houses, so too our mills: "they are a record of our past"! And we should not rule out that one day, the same concept could even be re-invented.